

The Importance of Feedback

by Dawn Leane

Providing open and honest feedback is a key management responsibility, but it's the one managers avoid the most particularly when the feedback is developmental or likely to be challenged.

There are many reasons for this, most often managers will say that they are simply too busy. However, based on my experience, I believe that a more fundamental reason underlies this reluctance; we are uncomfortable with others discomfort.

When we have feedback conversations, this unease may manifest in different ways:

Trying to 'rescue' the person. For example, "you were late delivering that report, but I know you've been very busy."

Talking around the issue, never actually calling it out. For example, "we have a challenging quarter ahead, it will be important that we meet our key milestones".

Using the term 'we' when the feedback relates to an individual. For example, "we didn't get the report submitted on time."

Diluting the feedback. For example, "You were late delivering that report, but you did a really good job on the presentation, the feedback was great"

Being vague or cryptic. This often occurs with positive feedback. For, example "great work" without specifying what the person did well. Or, when offering developmental feedback, it may be a long, rambling introduction to the conversation.

Clear, honest communication is essential. There is a very real cost associated with failing to give appropriate feedback, including confused priorities, missed opportunities and disengaged team members.

Feedback from Gallup suggests that when team members receive regular meaningful feedback, they are four times more likely to be engaged as those who do not.

Feedback is also a component of another key management responsibility, developing talent in the business. How would you feel if your manager was unhappy with an aspect of your performance, but didn't tell you? Possibly causing you to miss out on a promotion or secondment. Would that be fair? Yet as managers we can put our own team members in this position. Are you really prepared to set someone up for a lifetime of failure, rather than experience a few minutes discomfort?

Difficult issues don't go away just because you ignore them, they will only escalate. At some point, as the persons manager, you will be called to account. Whether that's by your manager, Human Resources or in a legal forum. Somebody will ask you to demonstrate



how you made the person aware that their performance wasn't at the required standard. How and if you managed the performance issues will impact your professional brand and reputation.

Yet with the right approach, even difficult messages can be delivered with clarity and in a way that leaves the other person feeling respected and fairly treated while understanding the improvement required.

The best managers position feedback as a team norm, which supports and develops the team members growth while creating a culture of continuous improvement. It is part of regular dialogue with their team, not a once-a-year event.

The FAST feedback method, introduced by Bruce Tuglan, suggests that feedback should be:

- Frequent
- Accurate
- Specific
- Timely

The frequency will depend on the individual team member, their level of mastery and key competencies. But as a rule of thumb, it is as important to provide 'in the moment' feedback as it is to have an annual sit down. Feedback is at its most effective when given in real time or if that's not possible, at the earliest opportunity.

When preparing for a feedback conversation, challenge your motivation in offering the feedback, whether it is positive or developmental. Make sure that you are not motivated by a need for control, your own value judgements or bias.

When delivering feedback on failure to meet performance expectations, give the other person the benefit of the doubt by believing that they made a good effort and didn't fail to deliver intentionally.

Consider also whether you adequately communicated your expectations. That doesn't mean that you can't give the feedback, but it will make it more balanced.

Good communication is achieved through the careful use of language, avoiding judgemental words such as 'never' 'always' and 'should', while also avoiding negative tone and body language. It is important to keep the discussion professional, not personal and avoid any subjective judgements. Stick to the facts.

Since we all process information through our own filters, a key component of giving feedback is to establish a shared understanding of the issue. Having shown or told the person what they could have done differently, ask them to reflect back their understanding of what you have said and what needs to change.

Feedback is, of course, a two-way dynamic. It's important that we don't only offer feedback, we should also invite feedback.

Early in my career I would ask my team members 'how am I as a manager?' The result was fairly predictable – nobody wants to tell their manager what their shortcomings are! Usually, we find out too late when that talented team member is on their way out the door.

How team members are managed impacts significantly on how they perform. And for us as managers, the feedback we obtain from those who work mostly closely with us is an important part of our developmental journey.

As the saying goes if you don't know how to ask the right question, you discover nothing.

We are taught to ask open questions but, on this occasion, closed questions are more beneficial. Rather than asking 'how am I as a manager?' consider instead 'what one thing could I do that would make your role easier?' or 'if I were to change one behaviour, what would you find most helpful?'

This also works well when managing upwards. If you aren't getting useful and specific feedback, consider asking questions such as 'which of my competencies are of most value to the business?' or 'if you could give me one piece of developmental advice, what would that be?'

360-degree feedback is another useful way to both give and receive feedback. But a cautionary note here, if you are inviting feedback, select contributors who will give you an honest, unbiased appraisal. Often the feedback that we hope to receive, is not the feedback that we need to hear. Likewise, if you are invited to contribute to someone else's rating, observe the guidelines above. Just because your contribution may be anonymous, it doesn't mean that you should be unprofessional.

Remember that these days, career development is about much more than the 'day job'. There are other behaviours and competencies that must be cultivated to ensure career success. Addressing issues, communicating with clarity, identifying and developing talent and building high performing teams are just some of them.

'One of the greatest gifts you can give another human being is constructive feedback on a blind spot they never knew they had. It's a great disservice not to say what needs to be said because it isn't comfortable. Care enough to give honest, accurate feedback.'

Dr Stephen R. Covey.



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